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SUBJECT: ASEAN SUMMITS: KEEP YOUR EXPECTATIONS LOW

Classified By: Classified by CDA Daniel Shields, reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

11. (C) Summary: Singapore-based ASEAN watchers predicted a disappointed public reaction to the ASEAN Summit to be held here November 18-21. Government sources and a leaked draft indicate that the new ASEAN Charter will not include significant compliance or disciplinary measures as many had hoped and will not specify what human rights standards ASEAN will apply. ASEAN is pushing responsibility for dealing with Burma to the United Nations, so the concept of regional problems being solved by regional actors has "taken a beating," a senior researcher said. Still, the Charter and other changes ASEAN plans to undertake could be quite meaningful over the longer term, the ASEAN watchers said. Former ASEAN Secretary General Severino said the new Charter is a tool whose usefulness will be determined by the strength of its implementation. The ASEAN Secretariat, despite taking on added responsibilities under the Charter, will continue to be hamstrung by limited resources, meaning that real power will remain with the political leaders, the analysts indicated. End Summary.

12. (SBU) The Charge hosted a lunch on November 14 to solicit the views of Singapore-based think tank researchers on the ASEAN and ASEAN-related summits that Singapore will host in the period around November 18-21. The academics included Rodolfo Severino, Visiting Research Fellow at the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies (ISEAS) and former Secretary General of ASEAN, Ralf Emmers, Head of Graduate Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Sheng Lijun, Senior Fellow at ISEAS, Yang Razali Kassim, Senior Research Fellow at RSIS, and Zhao Hong, Visiting Research Fellow at the East Asian Institute (EAI).

ASEAN Charter

13. (C) The main attraction of the ASEAN Summit will be the long anticipated signing of ASEAN's Charter, which will give the organization a greater institutional basis. However, Emmers predicted that many outside observers and the media will react with disappointment to the Charter for failing to do more. Government sources and a leaked draft (text available at <http://multimedia.prachatai.com-doc-2007-asean-charter.pdf.url>) indicate that the Charter will not include significant compliance or disciplinary measures as many had hoped and will not specify what human rights standards ASEAN will

apply. Emmers said the Charter should be seen as a consolidation move by ASEAN, codifying certain practices that have already been observed in the organization. Emmers, Severino and Yang Razali Kassim agreed adoption of the Charter would turn out over the long term to be a significant development for ASEAN. Ten years ago, ASEAN would not have considered including provisions on democracy and human rights, for example, and such provisions in the future will serve as benchmarks for expected behavior. The Charter is an important tool for ASEAN to promote integration, noted Severino. It will not have a short-term impact, however, and expectations should be modest. Its significance will only be felt in the long term as the group puts the principles behind the Charter into practice and starts to implement it.

Burma

14. (C) Emmers predicted that ASEAN will seek to shift the main discussion of Burma to the East Asia Summit, because the EAS brings in the two countries (China and India) that ASEAN believes have the most influence over the Burmese regime. In any case, ASEAN has, and believes itself to have, limited options and leverage over the junta, he said. ASEAN is pushing responsibility for dealing with Burma to the United Nations, so the concept of regional problems being solved by regional actors has "taken a beating," added Emmers.

Limited Role for ASEAN Secretariat

15. (C) Contrasting ASEAN with the European Union, Emmers noted that ASEAN technocrats have been forced to play a

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limited role while political leaders guard their decision-making power. Severino said his greatest disappointment in connection with preparations for the Summit was over the failure to provide greater resources to the ASEAN Secretariat, despite the Charter's mandate to strengthen it. The Secretariat's staff and budget are too small for it to undertake any independent action, he said. ASEAN will keep its existing practice of setting equal contributions for the Secretariat budget by all members, which means the budget depends on "what Laos is willing to pay," said Severino. He lamented that when he was ASEAN Secretary General he lacked the resources to even carry out

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any independent research and had to rely on contributions from ASEAN dialogue partners.

Lack of Dominant Leaders

16. (C) ASEAN's national leaders lack the degree of camaraderie they enjoyed before the 1997-98 financial crisis, commented RSIS Senior Research Fellow Yang Razali Kassim. In part, this was due to a greater degree of turnover in the leaders. Emmers added that the rise of democratic politics, especially in Indonesia, made foreign policy making more complex and leaders had to take into account the demands and interests of parliaments. It was unlikely President Yudhoyono would be able to restore the historic ASEAN leadership role Indonesia enjoyed under Suharto both because of the pressures of domestic politics and the fact that he will not likely be on the scene as long. It will take the concerted cooperation of the more developed ASEAN members (Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand) to drive integration and other initiatives, commented Yang Razali. The researchers agreed there is a gap between the original and newer ASEANs in their readiness to integrate. However, Emmers observed that Vietnam is increasingly occupying a middle ground between the newer and the more developed members of ASEAN. Its rapid economic development, acculturation to ASEAN norms, and increasingly astute

diplomacy have set it apart from the newer and lesser developed ASEAN members, he added.

"Leader" by Default

17. (C) The researchers noted that in spite of the slow pace of ASEAN integration, the grouping had been relatively successful in driving the process of regional institution building, including the East Asia Summit and the various ASEAN-dialogue partner summits. However, Severino admitted that this is more by default than by design. Historical mistrust between the major regional powers (i.e. China and Japan) has left ASEAN as the nominal leader. Sheng observed that while the EU had managed to bridge internal differences but had limited impact around its periphery, ASEAN was less cohesive internally but still exerted relatively greater influence on its neighbors.

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